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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

Happy Hanukkah to all who observe - this is the last day for this holiday, so I thought I'd better send out holiday wishes. Also, Christmas is next Friday, so Happy Holidays to all. Our holiday shopping is done - most of it done by my wife, online. Saved us both a lot of headaches; I hate shopping, especially at the malls. It has been, and will be a sparse celebration this year. No kids to spoil, other than the dogs. For my wife and I, it will be practical gifts for the most part, with a couple of "toys" thrown in for good measure. Gotta have some "toys" for the holidays! No matter how you look at it, money is tight these days - with or without a job. We just can't justify spending money that we really don't have or can "spare" by buying elaborate gifts. It's just the way it is, for many this year.

Another long and tiring week. And cold. And a Nor'easter headed our way this weekend. Depending on the path, we could get anywhere up to 2 feet of snow this weekend! Hopefully, we'll end up with the more optimistic weather pattern, and only get 6-7 inches of snow. Yeah, only...

Anyway, we here at A-ONE hope that you all have a terrific holiday season. Spending time with family and friends for the holidays is always (well, most of the time!) a great experience. Please celebrate the holidays responsibly, because we want you to be around for the new year.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Well, Christmas is exactly one week away as I write this. It's going to be a rather lean one here, I'm afraid. It's been a tough year, and I know I'm not the only one in that situation.

Yep, things are rough out there, and the single biggest expense other than housing right now for me?... health insurance. It's... crushing, for lack of a better word. I'm a fairly healthy under-50 who's got no history of

chronic medical problems, and yet insurance premiums are an astounding \$147.00 per week. PER WEEK!

Now, we're not talking about almost a hundred and fifty bucks a week for medical TREATMENT... we're talking about insurance... the CHANCE of needing coverage, basically a gambling contract between me and the insurance company. Does that strike anyone else as an outrageous amount of money for INSURANCE? I could see if I was in a high risk category or had a pre-existing condition that would necessitate medical care, but I don't.

Which leads me to my pet peeve of the day... the health care reform bill before the senate right now. I'm sorry, but it's so watered down now that it amounts to little more than a 'gimme' for the insurance companies.

I'm disappointed in a lot of people right now. I'm disappointed in the congress and senate, who had a chance to make some really really good changes that would benefit everyone, but spent so much time either obstructing or worrying about being obstructed that what we're left with is almost useless.

I'm disappointed in the insurance companies who are spending millions of dollars to tell us why they don't like the health care reform bill. Unfortunately, most of their logic is cockeyed and skewed, a lot of their facts are just plain wrong, and their 'attitude' is quite a bit like what we saw through 7 years of the previous administration: "Fear, fear, fear!"

I had really thought that we were emerging from that, but I guess not. It's been quite an effective tool, and banks and drug companies and now insurance companies have learned to use fear and confusion, half-truths and misrepresentations to cloud issues until the average person has a better-than-even likelihood of being pushed to doing nothing out of fear. And that's what's happening now. I doubt there's anyone who actually believes that the health care system is 'good enough as it is', but the fear caused by the misinformation and use of buzzwords like "socialism" and "government plan", as well as the old Reagan/Bush41 trick of making "liberal" a dirty word have added a whole other layer. And it leads to people saying stupid things like, "Government programs never work... and they better keep their filthy hands off my Medicare and Social Security!"

So that's what a lot of the companies and whole industries have decided to do... cloud the issue with misinformation and buzzwords until we the people are too confused and afraid to do anything about the situation we find ourselves in now. They've found that it's the easiest, most cost-effective way to get people to do what they want them to do. It doesn't matter that your facts are wrong or that you misquote someone. Most people out there are too lazy or too disinterested to check anyway. Luckily, not all of us are.

And the insurance companies will surely do what our friendly banks and credit card companies have done... and gotten away with... instituted policies, charges and interest rates that no one would have stood for ten years ago, and doing it early, before new regulations take effect. That's just not right, and I have a hard time understanding why ANYONE is putting up with it.

I'm disappointed in the President and the White House staff. They can stand there and tell you that this new bill would cover 30 million more people than are covered now, but the truth is that, in its present form, the bill simply guarantees 30 million more customers... 30 million more sources of as much as \$147 dollars a week... without them having to make any really

substantive changes at all.

I don't know what President Obama could have done differently, but at a minimum I think he spent too much time trying to get "the other side" onboard. In my opinion, if he'd said, "Do you want to be a part of this? No? Okay, then sit back and get the hell out of my way", we would, at worst, be in the same position we are now. At best, he might have brought a few conservatives into the conversation because they too have things they want to work on.

I'm not against trying to work with the other side of the aisle, I'm against trying and trying and trying and trying. Trying once, then saying, "Okay, we've got the majority and that DOES still count for something, so if you still want to stonewall, we can do that too" might have been the way to go.

My aforementioned disappointment in the House and Senate extends not only to the stonewalling minority that have seen fit to do nothing more than obstruct and talk all manner of silliness into any camera and microphone in range and trying to make everyone believe that the other side is partisan, but also to the majority leadership which seems more interested in not drawing attention to themselves than in getting anything substantive done, allowing the minority to ride roughshod over Congress.

My disappointment extends even to my own Senator. A man I voted for and had great hopes for. Senator Joe Lieberman is in his last term as U.S. Senator. I can assure you of that. There's simply no way that he can be elected again in the state of Connecticut. He used to call himself a Democrat, but ran as an independent when the state party decided to nominate someone else. Joe's always been conservative, and I've disagreed with him on a lot of things. But I always felt that, no matter what, he's stood by what he believed. THAT I can respect. Or, at least I *usta*-could.

Now, for some reason, Majority Leader Harry Reid likes Joe Lieberman. That has emboldened Lieberman to 'hold out' against the public option, something that a lot of people, myself included, think is necessary for any meaningful reform. So does Majority Leader Reid threaten to divest Senator Lieberman of his seniority and chairmanships? No. He simply pats him on the back and says, "that's okay, we'll work together next time".

It makes me wonder sometimes.

But the reason that Lieberman will not see another term is that everyone (with the possible exception of Senator Reid) will have a reason to not like him. He's a thorn in the side of the Democrats because of his stand on the health care reform bill, but he also caucuses with the Democrats, and does vote with them on most issues; something that's sure to rankle Republicans here in Connecticut. So he's ticking off both sides. He'll be a target from both sides in the next election, and all the early morning visits to diners (his trademark campaign feature) won't change that. While it's somewhat satisfying to think that the system will right itself, I just wish it was able to do it faster. [grin]

But more than all of that, more than my disappointment in the partisanship, the misinformation, the colossal wasting of time, the strain that the whole mess has put on the economy, and individuals standing only to make names for themselves and corporations looking to make profits with as little 'work' as possible, I'm disappointed in we the people. I'm disappointed that we're letting it happen. I'm disappointed that we haven't stood up and said, "Y'know what? You people work for US. We sent

you to Washington to look out for our interests, not to get yourself the kind of government sponsored health care that you're telling us isn't good, not so that you can make alliances and safeguard your government pension (another form of government sponsored support?) and certainly not to waste our time and money by playing "I'll block you" instead of engaging in any kind of meaningful dialogue. I'm disappointed not only in the fact that we're not getting better representation, I'm disappointed in the fact that we're not demanding it.

Well folks, there actually WERE some messages on the UseNet that I could have incorporated this week, but I'll save them for next week and hopefully I can spare you my political prattle for a while.

In the meantime, please consider picking up an extra can or box or bag of non-perishable food like canned veggies or rice or soup mix or whatever and dropping it off at your local food-share or shelter or place of worship. You've heard me say it all before, but there are people out there who could really use the help right now. So, to quote the old Nike commercial, Just Do It! Just grab an extra item or two and donate it. You're not going to change anybody's life, but you can make the holidays just a little bit easier for someone. I've mentioned this before too... get your kids involved. Show them that you don't have to make a big deal out of doing something to help someone, that there really IS a good feeling associated with just doing something small and anonymous once in a while. Remember: Your kids are the ones you're probably going to be relying on in your old age, so you'd might as well show them how to be charitable now. [grin]

I also want to mention that it's the time of year for parties. Please be responsible. Don't drink and drive. Remember: The life you save may be MINE!

Since this is the last column before Christmas, let me say season's greetings to all. We'll meet up again after the holidays, I'm sure. 'Till then, remember to keep your ears open so you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Wii Has 'Little Effect' on Family Fitness

If you're thinking of buying a Wii this holiday for health-related reasons, you may want to think twice. A professor of health and exercise science at the University of Mississippi reportedly tracked eight families for six months to see if Nintendo's motion-driven console would impact their fitness levels and found that the console "had little effect on family fitness."

The study, which began in fall 2008, hoped to determine whether software like Nintendo's Wii Fit (a hybrid game/fitness trainer) culminates in sufficient physical activity to improve family fitness. The university loaned Wii units with a copy of Wii Fit to eight families in the Oxford, Mississippi for three months, then tracked their fitness levels: Three months without the system, then another three months with.

Families were rated on various metrics like "aerobic fitness" and "balance and body composition," and pre-study fitness levels were established over a preliminary five day period. Individual usage was tracked using system software, presumably meaning Wii Fit's personal tracking profiles (as opposed to something custom-made).

Intriguingly, daily time spent with Wii Fit declined by 82 percent per household over the course of the study, from 22 minutes a day during the first six weeks to only four minutes a day during the latter six. The study's conclusion: "Modest amounts of daily Wii Fit use may have provided insufficient stimulus for fitness changes."

According to the press release, the study found that children "did display a significant increase in aerobic fitness after three months of use," which would seem to be a pretty significant /positive/ development. Here's where things get confusing: The release goes on to conclude that three months of Wii Fit use "revealed no significant changes in daily physical activity, muscular fitness, flexibility, balance or body composition for the family as a whole."

The operative phrase being "family as a whole," I guess. Translation: Kids actually /do/ experience significant aerobic benefits from exercise-games like Wii Fit, but...just reading between the lines here.../adults/ don't? Did the two groups cancel each other out?

Common sense still applies: If your heart rate hits a certain level for a certain amount of time, you're going to benefit aerobically. Whether that's running in place and doing jumping jacks or swinging a remote control around in a way that gets your whole body going, you're probably doing more good than harm.

Hasbro in Dispute with Atari over Dungeons and Dragons

Toy titan Hasbro is asking a US court to slam Atari for letting game industry rival Namco Bandai play with Dungeons and Dragons (D&D).

Hasbro is accusing Atari of sublicensing D&D role playing game handling rights in Europe to Namco Bandai without its approval and giving confidential information to the Japanese competitor in the process.

"Hasbro has resorted to these meritless allegations, in an apparent

attempt to unfairly take back rights granted to Atari," Atari said Thursday in a release.

"We regret that our long-time partner has decided to pursue this action. Atari will respond appropriately through its legal counsel in court."

Hasbro filed its suit on Wednesday in federal court in the US state of Rhode Island where the company is based.

Hasbro is asking the court to terminate its D&D licensing deal with Atari and make the company pay cash damages along with Hasbro's legal costs.

Hasbro also wants an accounting of any profit Atari or Namco Bandai made from a D&D deal.

D&D has become a globally popular role-playing game since it was launched in 1974.

Atari maintained that it has "a long and rich history" with D&D and has invested millions of dollars in the franchise to Hasbro's benefit.

Hasbro charged that earlier this year France-based Atari sub-licensed to Namco Bandai rights to distribute and support digital versions of D&D games and concealed the fact from Hasbro, which owns the worldwide licensing rights.

Video Game Watchdog Shuts Down, Victim of Economy

David Walsh said when he was assembling his first report card on video game violence 13 years ago, children were attacking on-screen monsters or aliens with imaginary chain saws and guns.

"When I saw kids as young as 8, 9 years old literally doing facial contortions as they killed and dismembered people, it was pretty shocking. And I think what happened is a lot of other people got shocked as well," Walsh recalls. "I don't think we want our kids' culture defined by killing, mayhem and dismemberment as entertainment."

That first report card, which singled out bloody first-person shooter games "Doom" and "Duke Nukem," made an instant splash on Capitol Hill in 1996 and made the annual reports issued each holiday season by Walsh's National Institute on Media and the Family a news fixture.

But there was no video game report card this year, and there won't be any more. The institute is closing its doors, a victim of the poor economy. Walsh, the group's founder and president, is packing his books as his staff of eight full-time employees prepares to shut down Dec. 23.

"Fundraising has been more and more difficult," Walsh said. "It really wasn't that we put ourselves out of business, because the technology is changing so quickly, the issues just won't quit."

It's a bittersweet end for the organization Walsh started in 1996. He takes pride in how "a little nonprofit in Minneapolis" was able to influence an industry that, according to the Entertainment Software Association, topped \$22 billion in U.S. computer and video game hardware,

software and peripheral sales in 2008.

"Ten years ago, a kid 10 years old could walk into any store in America and buy an ultra-violent, adult-rated game. That's no longer true," Walsh told The Associated Press in his office, where empty boxes await his books.

While some people have posted on gaming Web sites celebrating the institute's demise, others have praised its role in helping get retailers to post game ratings and ask for an identification when selling mature-rated games.

"Were it not for those collaborative efforts by all sides, it's questionable whether there would have been a non-legislative resolution," Hal Halpin, president of the gamers group the Entertainment Consumers Association, told the AP.

When he issued his first report card, Walsh said, there were two rating systems for video games battling it out and "when a game would be rated was a hit-or-miss deal." Since then, an industry group established in 1994, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or ESRB, has become the standard in rating computer and video games.

Walsh said he got many tips about video games from industry insiders. His organization hired students to play video games and sent boys and girls to see if retailers would sell them M-rated games without asking for an ID.

It was Walsh's group that announced in 2005 that the best-selling video game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" contained graphic sexual images that could be unlocked using an Internet download. That led major retailers to pull the game from their shelves. The ESRB eventually revoked the game's M (mature) rating and tagged it AO (adults only).

Walsh said his group got a computer game developer to reverse-engineer the game and prove that the sex scenes were built into the disk, not a modification created by a hacker on the Internet as the parent company of the game's producer had suggested.

Last summer, the institute learned that founding sponsor Fairview Health Services was pulling out. After looking at going independent, the institute's board decided to shut down at the end of the year. Walsh said the organization is talking to three nonprofits about taking on its work.

On average, the institute's budget was \$1.8 million a year, according to Walsh.

With white hair, rimless glasses and black sport jacket, Walsh, 64, resembles a high school teacher, which he was. The father of three grown children takes a low-key approach and says he's never endorsed censorship.

The New Jersey native has written books about the impact of consumerism and media on kids (his 10th book comes out next year) and says the institute was a way to help parents make informed choices for their children. Others were monitoring television, but less focus was on video games.

Author Steven L. Kent of Seattle, who wrote "The Ultimate History of Video Games," appeared at the annual releases of the Walsh reports. Kent said the institute's voice will be missed.

"I think the game industry will look back and pine for the days when their top opposing voice had as much self-restraint as Dr. Walsh had," Kent said.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Futurist Predicts Doom for Microsoft, Platform Wars

"We are at the cusp of huge changes around us in everything we look at", said analyst and futurist Mark Anderson at his annual predictions dinner Thursday night in New York. "There's never been a more exciting year than 2010", the author of the influential Strategic News Service exclaimed.

Pointing to an amazing set of changes in platforms next year, Anderson's predictions lay out a framework for a radical upheaval in the status quo. And Anderson's worth listening to - unlike many navel gazers, he pointedly rates his predictions at the end of each year, and currently claims a 97 percent accuracy rate. Some of his notable "calls" over the past five years include predicting the meteoric rise of netbooks, the HDTV price collapse, the oil price increase and decrease, and bottom of the 2008/2009 stock market crash.

His first two predictions covered both the upheaval in computing platforms, and in operating systems:

"2010 will be The year of Platform Wars: netbooks, cell phones, pads, Cloud standards. Clouds will tend to support the consumer world (Picnik, Amazon), enterprises will continue to build out their own data centers, and Netbook sector growth rates continue to post very large numbers."

2010 will be The year of Operating System Wars: Windows 7 flavors, MacOS, Linux flavors, Symbian, Android, Chrome OS, Nokia Maemo 5. The winners, in order in unit sales: W7, MacOS, Android. W7, ironically, by failure of imagination and by its PC-centric platform, actively clears space for others to take over the OS via mobile platforms.

"A new platform happens once every 10 years", Anderson stated, but in 2010, "we have three to four happening all at once."

There will be a huge market-share land-grab going on next year, and that is a great thing for anyone looking to start a company, he said. "It's going to be full on poker high-stakes Las Vegas fun!"

Although Anderson called the phone "the most interesting computer platform" and said it was responsible for "driving innovation: software, business models (and) distribution", he called netbooks are almost as important. He specifically called out the 9-inch by 7-inch form factor as the sweet spot, predicting that "more resolution and power will be

crammed into this form factor." Winners will deliver the biggest bang, and the most value for the dollar.

Anderson was also very bullish about Apple's upcoming tablet, predicting a boatload of sales. Anderson attributed Jobs' "deep hatred for John Sculley" as the reason why Apple waited so long to enter the market. It's taken Jobs three years to get over his "We Will Never" Newton stance that he took when regaining the CEO post. "You have to feel sorry for Michael Dell", Anderson lamented, as he called Apple's tablet a "game changer" and a type of netbook that will "eat share the way the iPod eats share."

When asked about the Kindle and other eBook readers, he dismissed them as a single-function, and a mostly brain-dead flavor of netbook.

Moving on to the cloud, Anderson sees rocky times ahead, particularly in the corporate world.

"There will be a Cloud Catastrophe in 2010 that limits Cloud growth by raising security issues and restricting enterprise trust. CIOs will see the cloud as the doorstep for industrial espionage."

Anderson continues to be bullish on personal and consumer use of the cloud, but sees a major pullback for enterprise adoption next year. He reasoned that "CIOs are mistrustful of the cloud now", and that it is "about time for something to happen". The catastrophe will take one of two forms - either a huge security breach, or a lengthy outage. This will empower CIOs to build out their own hardened data centers, "instead of shipping the company jewels to Amazon," he said.

Anderson followed that up by predicting a huge split between corporate and personal computing. Although personal phones and notebooks have been infiltrating corporate America, that will stop next year, he predicts:

"A huge chasm opens in computing, between Consumer and Enterprise (government/business.), with Apple, Google and most Asian hardware companies in Consumer, and Dell, IBM, Cisco, and MS on the Enterprise side. HP will straddle both. Before 2010, talk was all about unifying consumer and enterprise. Now, talk will be about their split."

This is particularly contra-indicated, he said, by our own intuitive experience. Last year the trend seemed to be towards software everywhere. "Forget about it", he warned. "It's not a beautiful one size world." This dramatic market split is happening very quickly, but he also predicted tremendous opportunity for new companies. We will see "new ideas, new concepts, and new companies on the consumer side that (are) really going to take off!"

One of the first big casualties? Microsoft's chief software architect, Ray Ozzie. Calling Ozzie a personal friend, Anderson said that he's unhappy, and just doesn't fit into Microsoft's aggressive and argumentative corporate culture. He agreed with Gates that Ozzie is probably "the world's best programmer", but he's not the right leader for Microsoft, at least not today. He wouldn't elaborate, except to say that Ozzie is "spending a lot of time away from home these days."

That's not the only bad news for Microsoft next year, as Anderson sees even more fail on the horizon:

"Microsoft loses in its Consumer play: except for gaming, it is Game Over for MS in Consumer. This will make Consumer the place to be, where the most robust and exciting change artists will work."

Sure, Microsoft has Xbox, he conceded, "but the failure of the Windows Mobile system to attract a larger share is the turning point for the company." The straits are dire in Redmond, as Anderson said he found it hard to be optimistic about an operating system company without a pure play on the phone.

Anderson specifically pointed to the collapse of the Pink team, the lackluster 6.5 version of Windows Mobile, and the horrific loss of market share to Android, especially when "no one knows what Android is."

Finally, he likened Microsoft without a mobile OS to the minicomputer makers along Route 128 in Boston in the 80s - Wang, Data General, Digital and others, who pooh-poohed the PC and called it a toy. It's "Game Over, and Done Deal" for Microsoft in the consumer market, he said.

Anderson also spent a good bit of time talking about the world economy in general, and China and Japan specifically.

Anderson said that he's particularly down on China, noting that the country is far from being a market economy. The country's banks, he said, are simply "tubes through which government feeds money to selective industries", and warned that "the toothpaste is starting to come out of the tube."

That led Anderson to conclude that "something bad is going to happen". Although he said he thinks the Chinese government is smart, and will react quickly, their deep stumble will hurt not just themselves, but their trading partners, and will have a huge impact on the world economy.

Part of the problem with China, Anderson explained, was that by pegging the Yuan to the dollar, all kinds of devastating devaluation occurs around the world. And that will end up pitting not just Obama against China, but the rest of the world against China as well. It's simply an unsustainable situation, he said, and "that pressure will be unable (for the world) to ignore."

He also accused Japan of cooking the books, falsifying a decade-long recession while actually thriving at the expense of the US. Why? Because the U.S. threatened trade retribution, and the Japanese got smart. Realizing that a 15 percent tariff across the board would kill their country, they've taken on a public poor, poor me stance, while Panasonic, Toyota and Canon built world-domination using technology mostly invented in the US.

Finally, Anderson said he thinks that technology stocks will continue to recover next year, but the rest of the market will lag. He also thinks the price of oil will climb to \$120 dollars in six months before the speculators start jumping back in and really driving the price skyward. And he thinks that the world will begin to look much more favorably on the Nordic countries, Canada and Australia, as "OK places where they don't shoot anyone, mind their own business, and make good returns on investments."

After a decade of complaints leading to 1.7 billion euros in fines against Microsoft Corp., European regulators have ended their last pending antitrust case against the U.S. software maker as the company agreed to let European computer users choose from a menu of Web browsers that compete with its Internet Explorer.

Microsoft said it will start sending updates in March to Windows computers in Europe so that when PC users log on, they will see a pop-up screen asking them to pick one or more of 12 Web browsers to download and install. People who buy new PCs will see the screen when they start up for the first time.

The top five browsers - Microsoft's Internet Explorer, Mozilla's Firefox, Google Inc.'s Chrome, Apple Inc.'s Safari and Opera, will be given more prominent placement on the screen. The selections will rotate from computer to computer, so none of those five browsers will always be first.

This mechanism will be used for five years in the 27-nation European Union plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Microsoft could be fined 10 percent of its annual revenue if it doesn't stick to its commitment.

In return, the European Commission agreed to drop charges it filed against Microsoft in January that said installing Internet Explorer, or IE, as part of the Windows operating system, which runs most of the world's computers, gave Microsoft an unfair advantage.

Users in the U.S. and elsewhere won't see a change, however. Brad Smith, Microsoft's general counsel, said that an older antitrust case in the U.S. had already determined that Microsoft didn't need to separate its browser from the Windows operating system. And regulators in other regions, he said, might want a different approach.

The deal came on the same day that U.S. regulators piled on new antitrust charges against Intel Corp., seeking to end what the Federal Trade Commission described as a decade of illegal sales tactics that have crippled rivals and kept prices for computer chips artificially high.

Although Wednesday's deal with Microsoft ends all formal antitrust charges brought by European Union regulators, the EU is still investigating a complaint that Microsoft isn't sharing enough technical information that would help rival companies design software that works well in IE browsers and with Windows, Office and other programs.

The EU said it would watch to see if rivals benefit from the changes as it wrap up its investigation.

With that, Microsoft closes the latest chapter in what has been a long - and expensive - antitrust epic.

In the late 1990s, as the U.S. courts were considering whether Microsoft had abused its monopoly to crush browser competitor Netscape, complaints were filed in the EU accusing Microsoft of withholding key information from rivals in server computers and media players.

In the U.S., where the antitrust case was finally settled in 2002, Microsoft was not asked to split out its Web browser from Windows. But the EU took a different tack, foreshadowing Wednesday's browser decision

when it told Microsoft to sell a version of Windows without the media player in 2004.

As Microsoft labored to meet the terms of the U.S. settlement - among them the production of documents to help rival software makers, which the Justice Department will oversee into May 2011 - it also racked up hundreds of millions of euros in fines in the EU for similarly making it hard for those competitors to build working programs. The company was fined again later for charging too much for rights to that information.

The European Commission's Web browser investigation began with a complaint from Norwegian Web browser maker Opera Software ASA in late 2007. At first, Microsoft offered to sell a Europe-only version of Windows with no browser at all, which regulators denounced as hindering consumer choice, not helping it.

Wednesday's deal resolves a serious competition concern, said Neelie Kroes, the EU's competition commissioner.

"It is as if you went to the supermarket and they only offered you one brand of shampoo on the shelf, and all the other choices are hidden out the back, and not everyone knows about them," she said. "What we are saying today is that all the brands should be on the shelf."

Microsoft, which is based in Redmond, Wash., sounded pleased that the long slog was drawing to a close, and its general counsel said the company would continue to work with regulators as new questions arose.

"We cannot take our eye off the ball when it comes to antitrust issues," Smith said in an interview.

Most makers of other Web browsers were also optimistic about the deal, including Opera, which trumpeted it as a victory for the future of the Internet.

Various estimates show Internet Explorer with about two-thirds of the global browser market, followed by Firefox at about a quarter. Apple's Safari and Google's Chrome have smaller shares, as does Opera. Makers of the rival browsers hope to gain share as Microsoft makes downloading and installing them easier.

Mozilla, which makes Firefox, was happy to see that the EU agreement would stop Microsoft from repeatedly prompting users to switch from other browsers to Internet Explorer.

While Google is currently a minor player in this market, it has ambitious plans for a browser-based operating system meant to challenge Microsoft's Windows. Google said Wednesday that more competition would make browsers more innovative and would draw more people to use Internet-based programs for tasks like word processing instead of ones that run from Windows desktops.

Although the browser choice screen introduces consumers to the idea of switching, it doesn't mean they'll bother to do it, and industry watchers are skeptical that the deal will make much of an impact on the Web browser market.

"Consumers can switch browsers today if they wished," said Neil MacDonald, a technology analyst for Gartner Inc. "The problem is, most people don't understand why they would want to switch. They're not

highly motivated to switch. And in some cases, they wouldn't know how to switch."

In other words, the resolution to this case may let Microsoft keep the EU off its back while keeping its top Web browser market share. That's crucial to Microsoft, even though the free program is a money-loser for the company, because the Web may eventually become a more important platform than Windows.

"This isn't about the browser," MacDonald said. "To protect Windows, Microsoft needs to control the browser."

U.S. Reported Ready To Join U.N. Cyberattack Talks

The Obama administration has decided to join United Nations talks on cyberwar and Internet crime. After several years of staying out of talks between the U.N. and other countries, the U.S. will participate in discussions with Russia and the U.N.'s Arms Control Committee, sources told The New York Times.

The committee has been leading the talks between nations that wish to tackle cybercrimes. The U.S. is interested in reducing cybercrimes and limiting military use of cyberspace, while other countries such as Russia are interested in talks on cyberterrorism.

Observers say U.S. participation in the talks indicates the Obama administration wants to clamp down on cybercrime. The talks come amid rising cyberattacks on banks, government agencies, and businesses.

On July 4, more than two dozen U.S. government and business web sites were attacked, including those of the Federal Trade Commission, the Secret Service, and the Transportation Department.

Large-scale attacks took place between Russian and Georgia last year, and Estonia's government was crippled after a cyberattack. These attacks have increased in number and severity over the years and will continue unless something is done, according to Jose Nazario, a security expert at Arbor Networks.

Cybercrime has a devastating effect on the nation's economy and is increasing each year. In 2008, the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received 275,234 complaints, a 33.1 percent increase from 2007. Attacks cost \$264.6 million, up from \$239.1 million from in 2007, according to IC3.

In August a Miami, Fla.-based hacker, Albert Gonzalez, pled guilty to stealing 130 million credit- and debit-card numbers from some of the nation's biggest retailers, including 7-11, Hannaford Brothers, and a slew of others from 2006 to 2008. He was part of an international crime ring and had coconspirators in other nations, including Russia. Earlier in the year he was indicted for his part in stealing credit-card information from retail stores, including Barnes & Noble, TJ Maxx, and Sports Authority.

While both nations may agree to prevent cyberattacks, Russia and the U.S. don't see eye-to-eye on criminal investigations. Russia wants to protect its sovereignty regarding investigations of internal

cyberactivity. The U.S., however, wants international help in investigating and defending against cybercrimes.

A substantial number of cyberattacks on U.S. military, business and personal computers are generated from China and Russia, according to security experts. Protecting its sovereignty may help Russia, but it would not help the U.S. fight cybercrimes and a cyberwar.

Australian Government To Introduce Internet Filter

Australia plans to introduce an Internet filtering system to block obscene and crime-linked Web sites despite concerns it will curtail freedoms and won't completely work.

Adopting a mandatory screening system would make Australia one of the strictest Internet regulators among the world's democracies. Authoritarian regimes commonly impose controls. China drew international criticism earlier this year with plans to install filtering software on all PCs sold in the country.

The government said Tuesday it will introduce legislation next year for the filter system to help protect Australians, especially children, from harmful material on the Internet. Critics say it will not prevent determined users from sharing such content, and could lead to unwarranted censorship by overzealous officials.

Communication Minister Stephen Conroy said the government would be transparent in compiling its blacklist of Web sites, but did not give details.

Conroy said the Australian filter was among a number of new measures aimed at strengthening online protection for families. It aims to block material such as child pornography, bestiality, rape and other sexual violence, along with detailed instructions about committing crimes or using illicit drugs.

Such material is already banned from publication on Australian sites, but the government currently has no control over it being accessed on servers overseas.

Conroy conceded it may not be completely successful.

"The government has always maintained there is no silver bullet solution to cyber-safety," he said in a statement. But, "it is important that all Australians, particularly young children, are protected from this material."

Critics say illegal material such as child pornography is often traded on peer-to-peer networks or chats, which would not be covered by the filter.

"The government knows this plan will not help Australian kids, nor will it aid in the policing of prohibited material," said Colin Jacobs, vice chairman of Electronic Frontiers Australia, a nonprofit group that seeks to promote online freedoms.

"Given the problems in maintaining a secret blacklist and deciding what goes on it, we're at a loss to explain the minister's enthusiasm for

this proposal," Jacobs said in an online posting.

The group is concerned the blacklist of sites to be blocked by the filter and the reasons for doing so would be kept secret, opening the possibility that legitimate sites might be censored.

Conroy's announcement coincided with the release of a report on a monthslong trial that found Internet service providers were able to block a list of more than 1,300 sites selected by the government without significantly hampering download speeds.

Telstra, Australia's largest Internet service provider, said blacklisting offensive sites using a filter system was feasible as long as the list was limited to a defined number of Web addresses, but that no single measure would make the Internet 100 percent safe.

"The blocking of a blacklist of sites is one element of the multifaceted approach that is required to create a safer online environment," Telstra Director of Public Policy David Quilty said.

Jacobs said smaller Internet service providers would likely struggle to pay the costs of imposing the new filters. Conroy said the government would help providers implement the filters, without going into details.

The filter would not likely not be in place before early in 2011.

Countries such as Egypt and Iran impose strict Internet controls, and bloggers have been imprisoned. China has a pervasive filtering system.

Controls in democracies that value free speech are less strict, though Internet providers have at times blocked or taken down content deemed to be offensive.

Canada, Sweden and Britain have filters, but they are voluntary. In the United States, Pennsylvania briefly imposed requirements for service providers to block child pornography sites, but a federal court struck down the law because the filters also blocked legitimate sites.

Australia Defends Disputed Web Filter Plan

Australia on Wednesday dismissed as "baseless" claims it was proposing a China-style plan for mandatory filtering of the Internet and denied the system could be abused to silence free speech.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy hit back at criticism of his plan to block access to sites featuring material such as rape, drug use, bestiality and child sex abuse.

"The claims that the Australian government plans to implement a censorship regime similar to China or Iran are baseless," Conroy told AFP.

"The government is only interested in blocking the absolute worst content such as child sexual abuse material, bestiality, sexual violence including rape and detailed instruction in crime and drug use," he added.

"There is no will or intention to block political comment," the minister said, adding that the government was trying to help parents protect

children using the Internet.

Conroy announced Tuesday he planned to push ahead with the controversial plan after a seven-month trial found Internet service provider (ISP) filtering of blacklisted sites could be done with 100 percent accuracy and would have minimum impact on connection speeds.

The minister said 15 other Western democracies had also taken steps to implement filtering of offensive content, with Italy and Germany already passing the necessary legislation.

"ISP-level filtering is a useful measure as part of an overall cyber-safety plan and Australia is not alone in working to ensure it is in place for the benefit of the community," he said in a opinion piece distributed to media.

The government will introduce legislation next year requiring service providers to block blacklisted material hosted on overseas servers. Australia's four largest Internet service providers have said they back the plan.

But Internet user groups, the pornography industry and others have likened the system to those operating in repressive regimes such as China and Iran.

Some industry experts have questioned whether the filter could be effective, and one, Bjorn Landberg, told Fairfax media it was "clear that there are very strong political motives behind this."

Search engine Google questioned whether the filter would go too far, by blocking access to harmless material on areas of legitimate political debate such as euthanasia, sexuality and terrorism.

But Conroy said the filter would only apply to material from overseas that was already illegal to distribute in Australia and that the blacklist would be maintained via a public complaints mechanism managed at "arms length from the government."

"Most people acknowledge that there is some internet content which is not acceptable in any civilised society," he said.

Germany's Largest-Ever Class Action Suit Kicks Off

Germany's biggest-ever class action lawsuit began Tuesday, with over 34,000 plaintiffs seeking to overturn a law on keeping phone and Internet records which they say infringes their right to privacy.

Since 2008, German telecom firms have been obliged by law to keep a record of every email sent, every phone call made - mobile or otherwise - and all Internet usage as part of measures to prevent terrorism and fight crime.

They are not meant to record or listen to the phone calls or read the emails. All that is kept is who emailed or phoned whom, and which websites were visited; and to keep this log for six months for police to be able to consult.

Critics say that the potential for errors and abuse is huge, that a

culture of excessive "Big Brother" surveillance is pervading other areas of life and that this and similar measures are being implemented in a ham-fisted manner.

The German constitutional court, which was not expected to take a decision on Tuesday, has in two previous rulings already forced the authorities to curtail the retention of data, known as "Vorratsdatenspeicherung."

Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger found herself in the unusual position of appearing both as plaintiff and defendant, having joined the action as a member of the opposition before becoming minister this year.

The World's First \$99 Laptop Debuts

We've been hearing about the "\$100 laptop" - a no-frills, low-power portable that meets the educational needs of children in developing nations - for a few years now. But no product has materialized - at least not at the \$100 price point - until now. Cherrypal has launched a \$99 portable, the Cherrypal Africa, a "mini-netbook" built to bring Internet access to the world's poor.

"We here at Cherrypal decided to build a laptop for those who can't afford to spend a couple of hundred dollars," he adds. The \$99 computer was named "Africa" in honor of PAAJAF, a humanitarian services group based in Ghana, West-Africa.

In addition to the 7-inch display, the Cherrypal Africa has a 400-MHz processor, 256 MB RAM, and 2 GB of flash memory. It runs either Linux or Windows CE. The netbook is available at Cherrypal's online store.

Seybold believes \$99 Africa may find a niche in developed nations too. "There are still more than 15 million Americans who can't afford an own laptop, who have to go to a public library or live without access to the Internet at all, which is becoming increasingly difficult," he writes.

Cherrypal, which has offices in Palo Alto, California and Hong Kong, is part of Tristate Hong Kong Group Limited.

This isn't the first time Cherrypal has launched an ultra low-priced netbook. In July 2008, it announced the "world's cheapest laptop," the \$139 Impulse NPX-9000. That price, however, was available only to volume buyers who purchased 100 or more units.

The non-profit One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative also offers a no-frills mini-note. Benefactors can purchase \$199 OLPC portables, which the OLPC then ships to students in developing nations.

Anyone reading this probably wouldn't want a \$99 Cherrypal Africa, which sounds woefully underpowered for the types of Web tasks we take for granted. However, the mini-laptop may have a bright future in the world's less developed regions, provided it fulfills its promise as a reliable, low-end device built primarily for basic Internet access. We'll know more when we get our hands on one.

Seagate Offers Very Thin Hard Drive at \$55 for 250GB

Big things come in small packages for Seagate Technology, which has introduced what it says is the thinnest 2.5-inch hard drive on the market. The addition to its Momentus product line, the Momentus Thin, is seven millimeters high, according to Joni Clark, product marketing manager for notebook hard drives. The drive is aimed at laptops, netbooks, backup devices, and consumer electronics.

While the technical news is the reduced height of the drive - Seagate says it is 25 percent slimmer than generally available 9.5mm 2.5-inch drives - the real-world advantage is in the cost/value equation. That's an important element as the Internet becomes increasingly mobile and smaller form factor computing devices, such as netbooks, tablets and mobile Internet devices (MIDs), continue to gain in popularity.

Indeed, the small-device drive sector will develop into a major battleground among disk-drive makers. "Our goal is to blow the doors off thin drives, so that everyone can enjoy the advantages of thin computing," Clark said.

She said currently 8mm, 1.8-inch drives with 40 gigabytes of capacity cost about \$80. A 1.8-inch 100GB unit runs about \$170 and a 100GB solid-state drive can run as high as \$936. Against this backdrop, Seagate is betting that its \$55 Momentus Thin with 250GB of capacity will have a significant impact.

The Momentus Thin, according to Clark, mainstreams more slender drives. "Today, if you want a slimmer laptop or netbook, one that is very slim, you are going to pay a premium because to get the smaller size all the components are more 'nichy' and harder to come by," Clark said. "So [the Momentus Thin] is incredibly affordable compared to the other options that are out there today."

The Momentus Thin comes in 250GB and 160GB models. Both have 8MB cache, a serial advanced technology attachment (SATA) bus that operates at 3Gb/second and runs at 5400 RPM. The company says the device will ship to its partners next month.

Clark said the Momentus Thin gives original equipment manufacturers and systems integrators the ability to build thinner machines or make existing designs more robust by facilitating better airflow around the drive.

A look at the potential market shows why Seagate is expanding the Momentus line. According to IDC, there were 450 million mobile Internet users worldwide this year. The firm expects that number to more than double and pass the one billion mark by the end of 2013. While not all of these will have hard drives, a significant number will.

Separately, Seagate announced that the top capacity for the Momentus 5400 line has been doubled from 320GB to 640GB. The Momentus family features encryption, FIPS 140-2 certification, free-fall sensors, and cache sizes as large as 16MB.

The Mozilla development community has rolled out the latest beta of its Firefox 3.6 browser.

In addition to the usual round of bug fixes, Firefox 3.6 beta version 5, comes with a number of new features and performance enhancements. The browser offers the ability for users to easily reskin the browsers with a new visual theme. The new version can also run scripts asynchronously, which should speed load times of pages that have multiple scripts.

The new release also aims to Web Open Font Format, a compressed file format for fonts.

Firefox 3.6, code-named "Namoroka," is based on the Gecko 1.9.2 layout engine. Over 70 percent of the Firefox third-party add-ons have been upgraded to work with 3.6, Mozilla officials report.

While Firefox 3.5.6. is the current recommended version for day-to-day use, users interested in testing the beta can download it from the Mozilla site. Those who already have the Firefox 3.6 beta should have the next version automatically downloaded and updated shortly. Feedback is encouraged.

Link Shortening Mania: Goo.gl, Fb.me and Bit.ly Join Fray

There was a time when TinyURL was all you needed to get control of a monster-sized URL that you wanted to share with friends. Now, Google and Facebook are getting into the link shortening business, while bit.ly has launched a professional product for bloggers and news organizations. With so many Web pages being shared across social networks, e-mail and micro-blogs, shortened links have become virtual gate keepers to large amounts of content hidden behind those anonymous 15-character hyperlinks.

But not all link shortening services are created equally. Here's what you need to know to take advantage of the new services from Bit.ly, Google and Facebook.

Bit.ly got a lot of attention earlier this year after it deposed TinyURL as the official link shortening service for Twitter. Not willing to stand still after that victory, bit.ly announced a 'pro' version of its service late Monday. Bit.ly Pro beta gives Websites, bloggers and news organizations custom domain names that easily identify the destination of shortened links. Shortened links from The New York Times, for example, would appear as 'nyti.ms.'

Bit.ly Pro will also provide users with a publisher dashboard containing real-time statistics that refresh every 15 seconds. The dashboard contains information about their bit.ly links including click through rates, detailed traffic graphs, worldwide activity and more. Bit.ly says the publisher statistics are richer than the publicly available stats you can see by just placing a '+' sign at the end of any bit.ly link.

In addition to The New York Times, other participants in the bit.ly Pro beta program include AOL, The Huffington Post, MSN, The Onion, The Wall Street Journal Network and blogger Baratunde Thurston.

If you are interested in signing up for the bit.ly Pro beta program you can either fill out the application form or email bitlypro@bit.ly. A bit.ly username is required for the beta program. Bit.ly has not indicated whether it will charge a subscription fee for the bit.ly Pro service.

Google has been so busy churning out new services recently like its dictionary, DNS service and improvements to Google Suggest that it's completely unsurprising to see Google come out with its own URL shortening service. However, this is not a stand-alone service like bit.ly or TinyURL. Instead, Goo.gl is for Google Toolbar and Feedburner users.

With Google Toolbar - available only for Internet Explorer and Firefox users - you can use the 'share' icon to broadcast an interesting Web page your viewing through Gmail, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Digg, Delicious and so on. Note that although the icons look similar, the share icon in Google Toolbar is not the same as the Shareaholic extension for Google Chrome.

Feedburner, a service that lets you analyze your Website's RSS feed traffic, launched the ability to broadcast your feed directly to Twitter. If you sign up for that service, your direct broadcasts to Twitter will use the Goo.gl shortening service. To sign up, click on your Feedburner account's Publicize tab, then select the 'Socialize' link in the left hand column and enter your Twitter account details.

Google says it may make the Goo.gl service available for more Google services in the future.

Here's an interesting trick: type fb.me into your address bar and your browser will automatically redirect you to your Facebook home page. The reason you were able to do that is because Facebook has followed the path of other social networks, most notably Digg, and created its own URL shortening service.

Facebook launched the service without any fanfare, and was first uncovered by Inside Facebook on Monday. At the moment, it looks like any link you share using a mobile Facebook client will shorten a URL to FB.me, and you will also see fb.me URLs when you push out status updates or any other information from Facebook to Twitter. You can also save time by using Fb.me to get to any page on Facebook such as fb.me/PCWorld.

Link shortening services are a great idea for managing monster-sized URLs to share with others whether it's through Twitter, MySpace or any other social network. But there are annoying risks to having all these shortened URLs floating around out there. Earlier this year, the link shortening service tr.im announced it would be shutting down its service by the end of December prompting concerns that many tr.im links would simply go dead. The service quickly reopened due to public backlash, and is now in the process of converting into an open source project.

You Want Wi-Fi with That? McDonald's To Make Wi-Fi Free

Your next business-office-away-from-home could be a McDonald's. The fast-food chain has announced that, beginning in mid-January, it will offer free Wi-Fi Internet access at 11,000 of its 13,000 U.S. restaurants. The service is presented as a partnership with AT&T.

McDonald's already offers free Wi-Fi in some other countries, such as Belgium and Italy. McDonald's currently charges U.S. customers \$2.95 for two hours of wireless Internet, although AT&T customers get free Wi-Fi.

McDonald's said that, in addition to no hourly charges, no food or drink purchases will be required. In fact, in some cases users don't even have to be in the restaurant. Some customers report that wireless is often accessible in the parking lot of McDonald's restaurants.

In 2003, McDonald's started offering Wi-Fi in its 75 San Francisco Bay Area restaurants, in 10 New York locations, and in 140 locations in Singapore. Originally, there was a \$4.95 charge for two hours of service.

Free Wi-Fi has become a kind of loss leader, where companies provide it to attract customers to locations or services and, hopefully, promote goodwill and up-sell to paid offerings.

For instance, in the fall Microsoft started providing free Wi-Fi at thousands of hot spots across the U.S. if a user tried its Bing search engine at least once. Google is offering free Wi-Fi at nearly 50 airports in the U.S. as part of an arrangement with Boingo Wireless.

This is in addition to Google's free Wi-Fi on all Virgin America flights. The service at the airports and Virgin America, however, only lasts until Jan. 15. Users can donate to specific charities during sign-in, which Google will match up to \$250,000. The company noted that about 100 million people will be traveling through airports through January.

And, for one year, Yahoo is giving away free Wi-Fi throughout New York City's Times Square.

Avi Greengart, an analyst with industry research firm Current Analysis, noted that the availability of free Wi-Fi at McDonald's could be very useful for business and family travelers, since there are "an awful lot of McDonald's, even more than - 'gasp' - Starbucks."

He noted that McDonald's has been steadily expanding its menu to provide more fare around coffee, and even offering a "McCafe" area in some of its locations. The attempt to provide more cafe-like offerings, Greengart said, in addition to this free Wi-Fi, could induce customers to stay longer than they otherwise might.

Customers could be either business users or family members. "Keep in mind," Greengart pointed out, "that Wi-Fi is not just for laptop computers," but also for many smartphones, the iPod Touch, PSPs, and other devices.

However, even with more free Wi-Fi hot spots, Greengart said business users in particular will still need cellular data plans if they expect to be online regularly while traveling.

Court To Review Employer Access to Worker Messages

The Supreme Court said Monday it will decide how much privacy workers have when they send text messages from on their employers' accounts.

The justices intervened in a case from Ontario, Calif., where three police officers and another employee complained that the department improperly snooped on their electronic exchanges, including many that were said to be sexually explicit.

While the case involves government workers, the decision could have broader privacy implications. Many employers tell workers there is no guarantee of privacy in anything sent over their company- or government-provided computers, cell phones or pagers.

Ontario has a similar policy, but a police official also informally told officers that no one would audit their text message use if the officers personally paid for charges above a monthly allowance.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco said the informal policy was enough to give the officers a "reasonable expectation of privacy" in their text messages and establish that their constitutional rights had been violated.

But Judge Kim Wardlaw acknowledged in her opinion that there is little to guide judges in this area. "The extent to which the Fourth Amendment provides protection for the contents of electronic communications in the Internet Age is an open question," Wardlaw said.

The appeals court also faulted the text-messaging service for turning over transcripts of the messages without the officers' consent. Both the city and USA Mobility Wireless, Inc., which bought the text-messaging service involved in the case, appealed the 9th Circuit ruling.

The justices turned down the company's appeal, but said they would hear arguments in the spring in the city's case.

The appeals court ruling came in a lawsuit filed by Ontario police Sgt. Jeff Quon and three others after Arch Wireless gave their department transcripts of Quon's text messages in 2002. Police officials read the messages to determine whether department-issued pagers were being used solely for work purposes.

The city said it discovered that Quon sent and received hundreds of personal messages, including many that were sexually explicit.

The case is City of Ontario v. Quon, 08-1332.

Florida Judges, Lawyers Must 'Unfriend' on Facebook

Florida's judges and lawyers should no longer "friend" each other on Facebook, the popular social networking site, according to a ruling from the state's Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee.

At least one South Florida judge warned her pals with a Facebook status update that they could be "unfriended," and the ruling has prompted others to do the same. The committee ruled Nov. 17 that online "friendships" could create the impression that lawyers are in a special position to influence their judge friends.

The committee did conclude that a judge can post comments on another judge's site and that during judicial elections, a judge's campaign can

have "fans" that include lawyers. And the ruling doesn't single out Facebook.

"Although Facebook has been used as an example in this opinion, the holding of the opinion would apply to any social networking site which requires the member of the site to approve the listing of a 'friend' or contact on the member's site," the opinion said.

A few on the committee dissented, saying judges should be allowed to have Facebook friends because those relationships are more like "a contact or acquaintance."

Although only the Florida Supreme Court can actually mandate what judges can do, most will likely follow the ruling out of an abundance of caution, said Craig Waters, spokesman for the Florida Supreme Court.

Judge Thomas McGrady, the chief of the sixth judicial circuit in Pinellas County, said he understands why the committee came to its conclusion: Judges need to appear impartial.

"We as judges can still be good judges and still have friends. Part of our job is to not let that friendship interfere in any way with our decisions," he said. "But others in the public who see judges listing a lawyer as a friend on facebook, they may think that because they are your friend, they will be treated differently."

McGrady, who is sending a copy of the ruling to the 69 judges in his circuit, said this potential conflict of interest is why he doesn't have a Facebook page.

"If somebody's my friend, I'll call them on the phone," he said, chuckling.

Florida Mom Under Fire for Tweet After Son's Death

A Florida mother is being criticized by bloggers and Twitter users for posting a tweet less than an hour after her 2-year-old son drowned in a swimming pool at her home.

Shellie Ross, a 38-year-old stay-at-home mother who lives outside Patrick Air Force Base, posted a message asking that people pray for her son after he had fallen into the family's swimming pool on Monday.

Her son, Bryson, died at a hospital less than an hour after paramedics responded.

Ross has more than 5,000 followers on her Twitter account, Military_Mom, and she also maintains a blog, Blog4Mom.

Some of her Twitter followers have also defended her.

On her blog, Ross has asked media outlets to leave her alone and said she won't comment on what happened.

Craigslist's chief executive told a court on Monday that an executive with eBay, a minority shareholder, warned him to improve relations with eBay's then-CEO Meg Whitman because she could be a "monster" and "an Evil Meg" when frustrated.

Craigslist's Jim Buckmaster testified that eBay Inc's dealmaker, Garrett Price, cautioned in an email that Craigslist was driving Whitman "to distraction" seven months after the auction company became a shareholder.

"He said he needed to tell me there were two Meg Whitmans. We had met and reached an agreement with Good Meg. There was another Meg, an Evil Meg. We would be best served to know that Meg could be a monster when she got angry and frustrated," Buckmaster told a court in Georgetown, Delaware.

Price later denied the allegations.

"Today's testimony by Jim Buckmaster concerning comments I allegedly made about Meg Whitman was false and malicious," he said in a statement.

eBay is suing to restore its stake, which Craigslist diluted to 24.85 pct, to 28.4 percent and to regain its board seat in Craigslist, where it became a shareholder in 2004.

In a week's worth of testimony in Delaware Chancery Court, executives from two of the most prominent Internet companies testified to a series of missteps and betrayals that led to the unraveling of their relationship.

A ruling on the case may come as early as January.

eBay said that after it launched the Kijiji online classified business in 2007 in the United States, where Craigslist is the dominant player, Buckmaster hatched a "coercive plan" to dilute eBay's stake and eliminate its board seat.

Craigslist, meanwhile, has sued eBay in San Francisco, saying the larger rival used its board seat to glean confidential information about the classified ad business.

Buckmaster, who began testifying late on Friday, was the sole witness on Monday, and was questioned for more than five hours by Craigslist's attorney.

Much of the hearing was dedicated to questions about eBay's access to and use of confidential Craigslist information.

Buckmaster also described an eBay proposal for international cooperation, and Craigslist's counterproposal, in the months after eBay became a shareholder.

Price's warning to Buckmaster about Whitman was apparently aimed at speeding up the talks about cooperation, but the two companies never agreed on a joint overseas plan.

eBay bought its stake in Craigslist in 2004 from Philip Knowlton, a disgruntled former Craigslist employee.

Whitman, who is now running for Governor of California, testified last

week that she had considered Craigslist her company's "play" in classifieds, an area she expected to grow rapidly.

An email that was introduced on Monday as a basis for questioning seemed to highlight eBay's frustrations. The Craigslist business was a "rocket ship" that was "doing fantastic," wrote an eBay executive in March 2005.

However, in the same message the executive described a meeting with Buckmaster as "quite an experience" and said Craigslist's staff were "definitely from another planet."

The hearing adjourned until Tuesday, when eBay's attorney is expected to cross-examine Buckmaster.

The trial is taking place in Delaware, where Craigslist is incorporated, and is broadcast over Courtroom View Network.

The case is eBay Domestic Holdings Inc v Newmark, et al, Delaware Chancery Court, No. 3705-CC.

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